

MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF POLICE



FALSE ALARM REDUCTION PROGRAM 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

MARCH 2021

OVERVIEW

The False Alarm Reduction Section (FARS) of the Montgomery County Department of Police was created to administer Chapter 3A, Alarms, of the Montgomery County Code and reduce the number of false alarms to which police must respond each year. False alarms can take police officers and other public safety personnel away from other events, endangering responding authorities and the community and wasting public resources.

In 2020, there were a total of **8,115 requests** for dispatch to which police did not respond, thereby reducing the negative impact of false alarms on the quality of service and safety. Although this represents about a 36% decrease compared with 2019, it should be noted that this decrease was, in part, due to the onset of the Novel Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the fact that homeowners and businesses were required to stay home or close for almost four months. Additionally, the number of calls to the Emergency Communications Center (ECC) were down over 30% compared with 2019. In 2019, the ECC received 25,508 burglar alarm related calls compared with 17,912 in 2020. This represents a difference of almost 7,600 calls. The time saved by Montgomery County Police by not responding to these cancelled alarms equates to approximately **4,328 work hours**.¹

There were fewer new alarm users in 2020 than in previous years. There were about **4,700** new alarm users in 2020, which was about a **3.0%** decrease compared with 2019. In the more than 25 years since the program was initiated, the section has consistently increased the number of alarm users who experience zero false alarms. **In 2020, almost 84,000 alarm users, or about 91%, had zero false alarms.**

FARS continues its success in reducing false alarms and increasing the number of alarm users with zero false alarms – all positive signs. The *total* number of registered alarm users continues to rise, and, despite the increase in registered users in 2020, police officers responded to *fewer* alarm calls in 2020 than in 1994 when the enforcement of the amended burglar alarm law went into effect. These statistics, coupled with a 210% increase in the number of registered alarm users over the same period, demonstrates that a substantial and *sustained* reduction in false alarms has been achieved.

FARS plans to continue its amplified enforcement initiative and remain in the forefront as subject matter experts in the field of false alarm management and reduction.

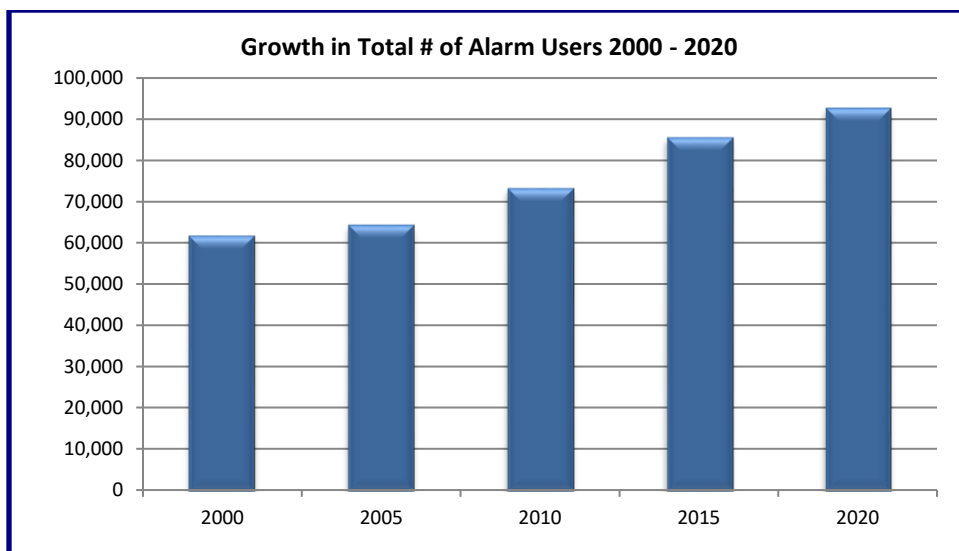
2020 FALSE ALARM REDUCTION

Alarm Users

Montgomery County is the most populous jurisdiction in the state of Maryland, consisting of nearly 1.1 million residents. In 2020, FARS received a total of 4,747 new alarm user registration forms (residential and commercial). Although this was about a 3.07% decrease

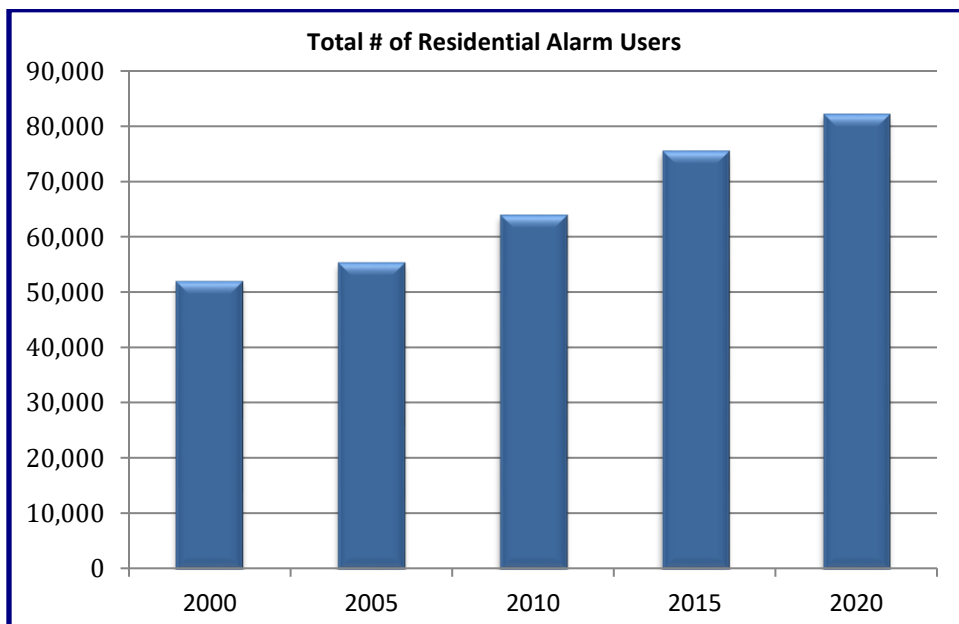
¹ This figure is based on the average time of 16 minutes each for two officers per alarm call.

in the total number of new registered alarm users between 2019 and 2020, the number of registered users remains above 92,000 users. Of this number 81,977 were residential users and 10,380 were commercial users.



The alarm user registration renewal process enables FARS to keep the alarm user database current by removing those users who no longer have an alarm system or have moved out of the county. This allows FARS to perform statistical analysis using more accurate numbers, which results in more meaningful reporting.

Overall, Montgomery County has experienced a 210% increase in total alarm registrants since 1994, driven primarily by the number of residential alarm users – more than 81,900 users – an increase of about 179% since 1995.

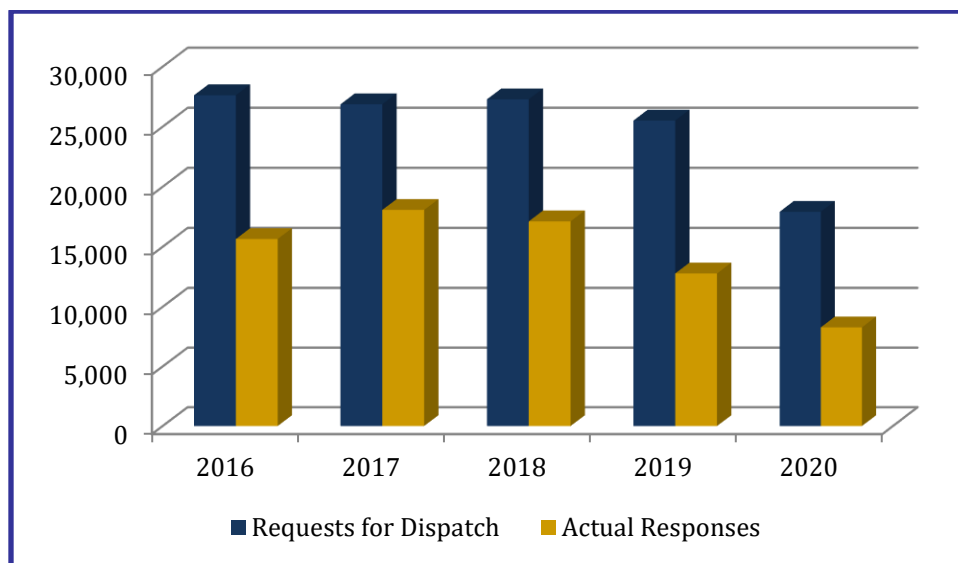


Alarm Responses

A false alarm is an alarm system activation that results in a dispatch request that is not cancelled prior to the arrival of law enforcement at the site and in which the responding authority finds no evidence of criminal activity to justify a police response. There are several common causes of false alarms:

- Inadequate training of those allowed access to the system, including accidental alarms caused by house/pet sitters, house cleaners, contractors, etc.
- Pets.
- Weak or depleted system batteries.
- Open, unlocked, loose-fitting, or defective door/window sensors.
- Drafts from air conditioners/heaters or open windows that cause movement of plants, curtains, etc.

The graph below shows the number of requests for dispatch versus actual responses. *Requests for dispatch* include the number of times that an alarm monitoring company calls 9-1-1. *Actual response totals* include the number of times that an officer arrives at a location and investigates the cause of the alarm. Alarm companies are required to cancel a police response when they determine that the alarm activation is false or that a response is not needed. **In 2020, alarm companies cancelled 3,996 requests for dispatch or about 22.3% of the total requests for dispatch.** These cancellations provided officers with more time to engage in other more critical law enforcement activities and community policing initiatives.



Historically, the number of dispatch requests has been declining: the numbers have dropped about 59% over the last 25 years and about 38% over the last five years. In 2020, the number of dispatch requests decreased by about 30%, from 25,508 in 2019 to 17,912. The number of actual responses to alarm calls decreased by about 3,100, which was a reduction of about 25% in 2020 compared with 2019. The decrease in responses between 2019 and 2020 was substantial due to the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 precautions put in place by

Montgomery County between March and June of 2020. More importantly, the percentage of dispatch requests that resulted in a response was lower (60%) in 2020 than in 2019 when the percentage was 63%. This number has decreased slightly this year, as the actual number of burglar alarm related calls decreased by about 30% in 2020 compared with 2019.

False Alarm Rates

The false alarm rate is the most common measure of false alarm reduction as it calculates the number of false alarm dispatches relative to the total number of alarm users.

Year	Total Registered Users	Total False Alarms	False Alarm Rate
1994	29,756	42,821 ²	1.44
2004	63,748	19,190	.30
2009	71,011	17,533	.25
2014	81,513	16,709	.20
2020	90,304	9,636	.11

This table demonstrates that, although the total number of registered users has increased over the last 25 years, the false alarm dispatch rate has continued to drop. In 2020, this dispatch rate was down to 0.11 compared with 0.15 in 2019, which equates roughly to a 27% decrease. Montgomery County's false alarm dispatch rates remain among the lowest in the country.

Another measure of program effectiveness is the total number of registered alarm users who had NO false alarms. In 2020, a total of 83,983 alarm users had ZERO false alarms; essentially, 91% of all alarm users in Montgomery County successfully managed their alarm systems. This contrasts with 1995, the year after the county alarm code was implemented, when only 56.2% of the registered alarm users had no false alarms. This is a significant improvement, given the increase in the total number of users. The table below represents the false alarm numbers over the last two decades.

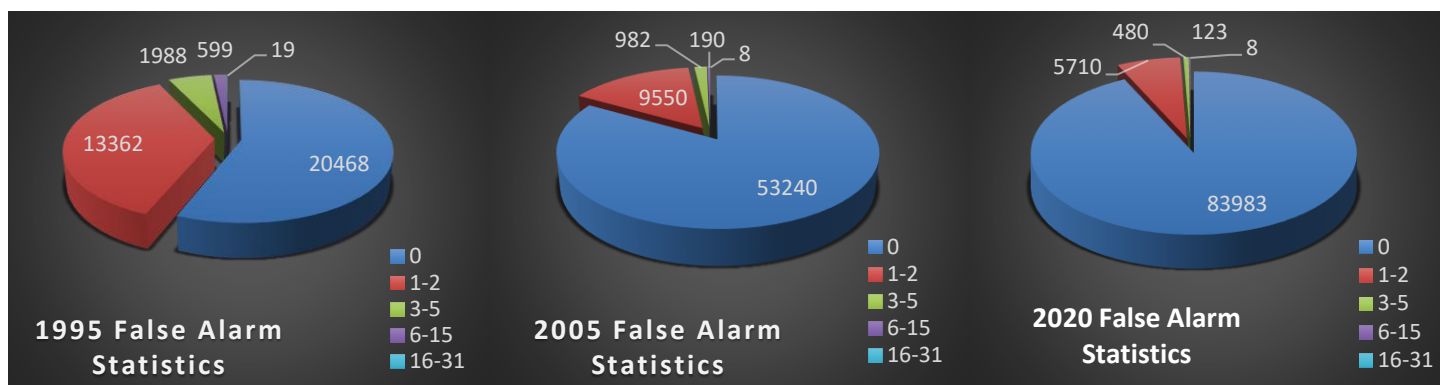
2020 <i>Total Users = 90,304</i>		2005 <i>Total Users = 63,970</i>		1995 <i>Total Users = 36,436</i>	
False Alarms	Alarm Users	False Alarms	Alarm Users	False Alarms	Alarm Users
0	83,983	0	53,240	0	20,468
1-2	5,710	1-2	9,550	1-2	13,362
3-5	480	3-5	982	3-5	1,988
6-15	123	6-15	190	6-15	599
16-31	8	16-31	8	16-31	19

² The number of verified calls for 1994 is unknown. The total number of alarm dispatches was 42,821.

A closer examination reveals that commercial alarm users have improved by 229% since 1995 in terms of eliminating false alarms, while residential users have improved by about 321% success in preventing false alarms. In 1995, nearly 7% of all commercial alarm users had six or more false alarms. In 2020, there were a total of 131 alarm users that had six or more false alarms. Out of this total, 129 or 98.5% were commercial alarm users. On the residential side, there were two alarm users or 1.5% that accounted for six or more false alarms. This was about an 14.4% decrease over 2019.

Number of Users with No False Alarms				
	1995	2005	2020	% Change
Commercial	2,352	5,730	7,740	229
Residential	18,116	47,510	76,246	321

The charts below show in graphic form that more alarm users (as a percentage of total alarm users for a given year) are achieving the zero false alarm thresholds. This statistic, which is supported by the low false alarm rate, is indicative of the success of the overall false alarm reduction program. These reductions become more significant when viewed in the context of the steady increase in the number of alarm users each year. This is a positive measure of the program's impact on the county's resources.



Cost Avoidance

As a direct result of FARS' strict enforcement of the alarm law, there were 8,115 alarm calls to which police officers were not required to respond in 2020. Using the averages established by the Police Department, this equates to approximately **4,328 hours of police officer time or an estimated \$916,995 in cost avoidance**. Monetary cost avoidance is based on an average cost³ of \$113 based on an average of 16 minutes per alarm response by two officers. Cost avoidance was down by about 35% in 2020 compared with 2019. This is due to the ECC receiving about 30% fewer burglar alarm calls in 2020. Even with the number of calls to the ECC being down, we were still able to amass a significant cost avoidance for the County.

³ This includes fringe benefits, operating expenses, and vehicles but does not include costs related to policing, such as training, the cost of dispatching, etc.

REVENUE

The charts on the next two pages reflect the revenue collected by FARS for alarm user registration and renewal fees, false alarm response fees, alarm business license and administrative fees, civil citations, and appeal filing fees.

The first chart covers *calendar* year 2020. The second chart covers *fiscal* year 2020. The FY2020 chart is included only as a reference because budget projections are based on fiscal rather than calendar years. The more accurate chart is the calendar year 2020 chart as false alarms and the resulting false alarm response fees are calculated on a calendar year basis.

CALENDAR YEAR 2020	ACTUAL REVENUES
<u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u>	
Residential	\$139,150
Commercial	<u>12,990</u>
TOTAL	\$152,140
<u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u>	
Residential	\$165,859
County Attorney Collections	<u>1,340</u>
Total Residential	\$167,199
Commercial	\$ 24,285
County Attorney Collections	<u>350</u>
Total Commercial	\$ 24,635
TOTAL	\$191,834
<u>False Alarm Response Fees</u>	
Residential	\$ 28,397
County Attorney Collections	<u>14,333</u>
Total Residential	\$ 42,730
Commercial	\$268,158
County Attorney Collections	<u>18,225</u>
Total Commercial	\$286,383
TOTAL	\$329,113
<u>Alarm Business Fees</u>	
License	\$ 73,400
Civil Citations	279,000
Administrative Fees	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$352,400
<u>Appeal Filing Fees</u>	
Residential	\$ 0
Commercial	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$ 0
GRAND TOTAL	\$1,025,487

CALENDAR YEAR COMPARISON	ACTUAL REVENUES		
	2018	2019	2020
<u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u>			
Residential	\$149,985	\$135,210	\$139,150
Commercial	<u>16,640</u>	<u>14,100</u>	<u>12,990</u>
TOTAL	\$166,625	\$149,310	\$152,140
<u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u>			
Residential	\$182,105	\$200,200	\$165,859
County Attorney Collections	<u>2,273</u>	<u>1,975</u>	<u>1,340</u>
Total Residential	\$184,378	\$202,175	\$167,199
Commercial	\$ 28,240	\$ 30,788	\$ 24,285
County Attorney Collections	<u>955</u>	<u>545</u>	<u>350</u>
Total Commercial	\$29,195	\$ 31,333	\$ 24,635
TOTAL	\$213,573	\$233,508	\$191,834
<u>False Alarm Response Fees</u>			
Residential	\$ 62,848	\$ 65,135	\$ 28,397
County Attorney Collections	<u>24,928</u>	<u>19,302</u>	<u>14,333</u>
Total Residential	\$ 87,776	\$ 84,437	\$ 42,730
Commercial	\$291,119	\$245,430	\$268,158
County Attorney Collections	<u>49,255</u>	<u>24,382</u>	<u>18,225</u>
Total Commercial	\$340,374	\$269,812	\$286,383
TOTAL	\$428,150	\$354,249	\$329,113
<u>Alarm Business Fees</u>			
License	\$ 81,200	\$ 74,425	\$ 73,400
Civil Citations	354,000	424,250	279,000
Administrative Fees	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$435,200	\$498,675	\$352,400
<u>Appeal Filing Fees</u>			
Residential	\$ 30	\$ 45	\$ 0
Commercial	<u>30</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$ 60	\$ 45	\$ 0
GRAND TOTAL	\$1,243,608	\$1,235,787	\$1,025,487

The collection of false alarm response fees is always a priority for FARS. Strict enforcement of this aspect of the alarm law clearly shows that Montgomery County is serious about the issue of false alarms. If alarm users fail to remit the required false alarm response fees, FARS can place their account into a denied response status. Denied response means that the police will not respond to an alarmed location until the alarmed location's financial obligation is satisfied. Also, FARS refers these accounts to the Office of the County Attorney for collection action when appropriate.

FARS' collection rate was down slightly to 90% in 2020 compared with 92% in 2019. The combination of the Office of the County Attorney as the FARS Collector and the suspension of police response as specified in Chapter 3A, Alarms, for failure to remit false alarm response fees greatly enhances FARS' ability to collect on unpaid bills.

The following chart reflects the amount billed for false alarm response fees in 2020 versus the amount collected for both residential and commercial alarm users. Please note that the "collected" amount in the following chart reflects payments made against false alarms that occurred in 2020. The actual collection of monies for calendar year 2020 false alarms extends into calendar year 2021 and therefore reflects different totals than the Calendar Year Revenue Chart. Furthermore, this chart concentrates on calendar year 2020 and does not account for monies received from accounts that owed for previous years.

Calendar Year 2020 Billed versus Collected False Alarm Response Fees				
False Alarm Response Fees	Billed	Collected*	Past Due (>30 & <51 days overdue)	Delinquent (>50 days overdue)
Commercial	\$ 314,100	\$ 274,170	\$ 75	\$ 35,610
Residential	\$ 51,800	\$ 39,300	\$ 85	\$ 12,395
Total	\$ 365,900	\$ 313,470	\$ 160	\$ 48,005

**Represents fees collected in 2020 and 2021 against false alarm response fees billed in 2020.*

FARS is in the process of attempting to collect the past due amounts listed above. FARS has sent the overdue notices to all affected alarm users. The \$48,005 listed above either has or will be referred to the Office of the County Attorney for collection in early 2021, and the affected alarm users will be placed in a non-response status until payment is received.

CONCLUSION

Although COVID-19 had a direct impact on the False Alarm Reduction Program, overall, the 2020 Annual Report on the status of the program remains positive. In 2020, revenue was down by about 17% compared with 2019. This decrease is directly associated with the onset of COVID-19 and the County restrictions placed on businesses from March 2020 until June 2020. As stated earlier, these restrictions forced homeowners and businesses alike to stay home or close during this period in order to lower the infection rate. As a result of these restrictions, the numbers are not reflective of what we would see in a year without such restrictions. Our call volume was down about 30% compared with previous years. Even with call volumes being down, alarm companies were doing better at managing the alarm systems that they installed or monitored, and homeowners were being increasingly more responsible with their alarm systems.

FARS will continue its strict enforcement of all requirements for requesting dispatch, including providing the correct alarm user registration and alarm business license numbers.

The legally mandated non-response provisions of the alarm law resulted in 1,166 requests for dispatch that were denied as a result of the violation status of the alarm user or alarm business in 2020. This represents about 7% of all requests for dispatch in 2020, which is a slight increase compared with 2019 when the percentage was 6.3%.

There must be a continued effort to provide education and early intervention to alarm users who are experiencing false alarms so that these unnecessary alarm calls do not reach unacceptable thresholds and waste valuable resources. In 2020, FARS continued its enforcement efforts in the major offender project, which reaches out to alarm users experiencing excessive false alarms. The major offender project is instrumental in ensuring that alarm users experiencing excessive false alarms are educated about their alarm system and the impact on police resources. There were fewer alarm users in the 16 to 31 false alarm counts in 2020 than in 2019, with only eight commercial alarm users in this range. In 2021, FARS staff will continue its ramped-up efforts to intervene and educate alarm users that fall into this category expeditiously to ensure that we continue to reduce the number of alarm users in this range.

In 2020, FARS pioneered an initiative to notify alarm dealers and monitoring companies of any discrepancies in the information that they relayed to the 9-1-1 center. By providing them with this erroneous information early, the workload on FARS, ECC, and the alarm industry was reduced, thereby increasing compliance and the accuracy of information going forward. FARS has received praise from alarm dealers and monitoring companies alike as this effort will help reduce the number of civil citations they receive as a result of the discrepancies.

In 2020, FARS continued its initiative to educate alarm users about false alarms, their impact on police resources, and how to reduce the false alarm epidemic. On a bi-weekly basis, FARS uploaded bulletins on all police social media webpages. The information contained in these bulletins ranges from tips and tricks for reducing false alarms to what to do in the event of unexpected inclement weather. Education is key to the success of any false alarm program. As such, FARS decided that providing information to the residents and businesses of the County via social media would be the first step in getting the word out about false alarms, the responsible management of alarms systems, and ways to reduce false alarms. FARS has an abundance of information to release and plans on continuing the initiative indefinitely.

In 2020, Montgomery County employees were elected to two prominent positions within the False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA). Alberto Hook was elected President of FARA International, and Maureen Tonczyczyn was elected as President of the East Chapter of FARA. By holding these two seats in FARA, Montgomery County is positioned to have a direct impact on the burglar alarm industry through participation in industry association meetings and direct contact with alarm companies. Our goal is to raise awareness of the false alarm issue and collaborate with all stakeholders to find ways of reducing false alarms in Montgomery County and across the nation.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way in which many jurisdictions conducted business, and Montgomery County was no different. The restrictions enacted to combat the pandemic presented FARS with many challenges in 2020, most importantly, how to effectively provide

the residents of Montgomery County with the service that they were accustomed to receiving. Although there were restrictions in place for all businesses in the county, FARS was able to continue its exemplary service uninterrupted. The efficiency of the program never wavered during any phase of the pandemic. FARS management acted quickly to ensure that all employees could continue working without interruption. Each staff member was given the support necessary to telework from home. Additionally, they were given a laptop, VPN access, and the peripherals needed to do their work efficiently.

Looking ahead to 2021, FARS will continue its efforts to pioneer new strategies to reduce the wasted allocation of police resources by: 1) increased engagement with department stakeholders, including ECC and the Patrol Services Bureau; 2) enhanced engagement with alarm users and alarm companies through outreach activities. This includes an open discussion with alarm companies and alarm monitoring companies regarding the County's alarm law, with a view to educating them on how to better operate in Montgomery County and providing them with a resource to navigate issues that they face daily.